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ON PAGE **A-6**

NEW YORK TIMES
18 October 1985

U.S. Aid to Nicaragua Rebels Runs Into Snags in Honduras

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 17 — The transfer of \$27 million in United States aid to the guerrillas seeking to overthrow the Nicaraguan Government has run into trouble, according to State Department officials.

They say the main problem is the Honduran Government's reluctance to appear as a conduit for the aid. Honduras publicly denies that the 20,000 Nicaraguan insurgents operate from bases in Honduras.

Meanwhile, rebel leaders said today that private donors of money for arms had sharply cut their contributions because many thought the money from the United States Government had solved the rebels' supply problems.

The \$27 million, which is restricted to nonmilitary aid such as "humanitarian assistance," food, clothing and medicine," was authorized by Congress in July.

Honduras Seizes Supplies

Late last week, a plane carrying a shipment of supplies bought with that money landed in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, but the cargo was confiscated by the Honduran military authorities.

The Nicaraguan rebel leaders insist that the incident did not happen. The State Department said it was not responsible for the supplies after they left the United States, although several department officials confirmed the seizure.

Because of a combination of domestic political considerations and tense relations with neighboring Nicaragua, the Honduran Government has never acknowledged that it allows the American-backed rebels to move freely in the border areas. When Congress authorized the money for the aid, Honduras quickly announced that it would not allow the United States to open an office in Honduras to distribute the supplies.

The State Department set up a small aid office in Roslyn, Va., and decided to transfer responsibility for the supplies to rebel officials in New Orleans or Miami, the two shipping points. The Government is paying the cost of leasing planes to carry the supplies, but has put everything in Nicaraguan hands "at the water's edge," as one United States official put it.

This arrangement allowed the leaders of the Unified Nicaraguan Opposition, the umbrella organization primarily responsible for obtaining the supplies, to make private arrangements with the Honduran authorities.

TV Crew Sparked Action

But the Honduran military felt obligated to declare it had confiscated the plane's cargo because the Nicaraguan rebel official directing the shipment let a television crew to join the flight from New Orleans, State Department officials said.

"It put everybody in a position of undeniability," a State Department official said. "If Congress would let the C.I.A. do this, we wouldn't have this problem."

Adolfo Calero, political and military director of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the main rebel combat group, said today that no plane was unloaded in Tegucigalpa. He hinted that the plane had continued to another landing strip or had dropped the cargo by parachute. Other rebel spokesmen said the plane has since returned to the United States.

Rebels Deny Seizure

"The first shipments are in the hands of our people," Mr. Calero said at a news conference today. "I know of no cargo that was seized."

"Planes do land, and they do take off again and land in another air strip," he added. "Also, planes drop cargo by parachute, too."

Alfonso Robelo Callejas, an official of the Unified Nicaraguan Opposition, said the private donors, who he identified only as businesses and individuals in Europe and Latin America who deposit money for the rebels in foreign bank accounts, did not believe the congressional restrictions on spending the money were being strictly applied.

"The private funding has declined drastically because of the humanitarian aid," Mr. Robelo said. "People were approached in many cases and told that this is a bridge until some aid is approved. Well, now that it has been approved, they say, 'Okay, this is the end of the bridging.' Which is not true because how do we get munitions, how do we get weapons?"

'Scrutiny Is Amazing'

"Another problem is, you go to Europe and you go to Latin America," he said, "and they say there are ways to get around the restrictions, which is not true. The scrutiny under which this money is going is amazing."

Robert W. Duemling, a career diplomat who directs the aid operation for the State Department, said his instructions from Secretary of State George P. Shultz were to "adhere strictly to the guidelines of the legislation."

He said the money was being used to buy boots, uniforms and ponchos. He said the medical aid could include setting up field hospitals, paying doctors and nurses, and covering the cost of sending seriously wounded rebels to the United States for treatment.

Mr. Duemling said the ban on spending the money on "ammunition and anything else of a lethal purpose," had been a problem when considering buying equipment such as vehicles that could be used for both lethal and nonlethal purposes.

The preliminary decision, he said, is not to buy any such "dual purpose" equipment.

"For the opening period," he said, "we want to make sure that everything we do is beyond reproach."